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The Jewish Primary School

A LECTURE

By

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THE JEWISH PRIMARY SCHOOL.

The development of the intellect is the development of man, says Auguste Comte, one of the profoundest thinkers of modern times. He does not fail to recognize the momentous influence exerted by factors other than mentality entering into the evolution of society, but he wished to emphasize this point, that whether a single nation is to be appraised, or an epoch in the history of mankind as a whole, it is in every case intellectual attainment by which the degree of development must be gauged. In point of fact, it is, as Comte says, "the heart that propounds all questions; to solve them is the part of the intellect." An old Palestinian saying quoted in the Talmud puts the same idea in empiric form: "He who has knowledge, has everything; he who lacks knowledge, lacks everything." And this proverb in turn is an epigrammatic summing up of the Biblical notion of the Hakam, "the wise," "the knowing one," who is at the same time the good and pious man, the just, the God-fearing, the truthful, and the pure.

Because writers take too little account of this general historical principle set up by Comte, and at the same time are blind to the peculiarity of Jewish history in particular, a misunderstanding has arisen regarding the nature of the transition from the Prophets to the Scribes, from Biblical Judaism to Rabbinical Judaism. The intellectual endeavors of the Scribes are apt to be considered as a degeneration and decline from the idealism which pervades the conception of life laid down in the Scriptures. The truth is that the Scribes succeeded where the Prophets had failed. Through them the teachings proclaimed in the schools of the Prophets were

disseminated as the common property of the whole people.

That paganism was stamped out among the Jews, together with the immorality that accompanied it, is essentially the achievement of the first great Scribe, Ezra, and of his associates. And, again, if three centuries after Ezra the defeat of degenerate Hellenism by the Maccabees was a possibility, it was only because the Scribes, by their constant devotion, had permeated a whole nation with the love of their ideals.

In spite of the many vicissitudes to which the Jewish people has been subjected during nearly twenty centuries of dispersion, its intellectual development has suffered no interruption. Under the leadership of the Scribes, masses of the people were ready to defend the prophetic ideals at every cost and hazard—the same masses that had assumed an indifferent, if not a hostile, attitude toward the living words of the Prophets. It must be confessed that the victory of the intellect was not gained at a single blow. The Am ha-Arez was a recognized figure in Jewish life exactly at the time when the Talmudist stood at his zenith. Theoretically the Am ha-Arez submitted himself entirely to the teachings of the rabbis. But in the ordinary course of his life he was little influenced by them, sometimes he was even filled with deadly hatred for the exponents of Jewish learning. The deep veneration shown the scholar among the Jews of the Middle Ages, and the extraordinary respect felt for the educated man, were phenomena that co-existed, and were bound up with a wider spread of knowledge among all classes, and with a deepening of religious feeling throughout all the strata of the people. The last link in this long chain of Jewish intellectual development is the Lamdan as the dominant figure in Jewish life, especially with the Ashkenazim, and among the Ashkenazim especially in Eastern Europe.

The historical process just described comes out well in the popular sayings of various epochs. To this day many a Polish and Russian mother soothes her child with the lullaby:

What is the best Sehorah?
My baby will learn Torah,
Seforim he will write for me,
And a pious Jew he'll always be.

In Talmud times words of an entirely different tenor were likely to fall upon the ear of a Jewish child. "O that I had a sage in my power, how I'd bite him," was a current saying in the early days of the rabbis. And if we go further back in history, to Biblical times, we find the popular characterization of the leader expressed in such harsh words as "The prophet is a fool, the man that hath a spirit is mad." These extreme epochs of Jewish development lie worlds apart. But even two adjoining periods, the modern and the mediaeval, display a striking contrast. It is a far cry from the time in which the Jewish scholar was a merchant or an artisan, to the time in which the Jewish merchant or artisan was a scholar. In the Middle Ages there was no learned estate among the Jews, because the number of scholars was not large enough to constitute a separate class. In Poland, later on, when Jewish culture began to obtain a foothold there, there was again no learned estate, because the people itself was a nation of students. Every Jew was either a teacher or a pupil, or both at the same time. The Lamdan there did not belong to a peculiar class, he was the representative *par excellence* of the people as a whole.

The many centuries lying between the Prophet and the Lamdan are marked by two apparently incongruous currents. The suffering of the Jews was indescribable, yet their intellectual development proceeded apace without interruption. They are the enigma of history, contradicting by their existence the principle *mens sana in corpore sano*, true of nations as well as individuals. Their enslavement by the Persians, the tyrannous oppression of the Greek rulers, the cruelty of the Romans, and, finally, the persecutions set afoot by Holy Mother Church, who was so concerned about the salvation of the Jew that she

was ever ready to purchase it with his life—such conditions make one exclaim in wonderment, not at the survival of the Jew, but at his survival unstunted.

Our sages clothed the solution of the riddle in the form peculiar to them. Once upon a time, they say, the heathen philosopher, Oinomaos of Gadara, was asked, "How can we make away with this people?" His answer was: "Go about and observe their schools and academies. So long as the clear voices of children ring forth from them, you will not be able to touch a hair of their head. For thus have the Jews been promised by the father of their race: 'The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.' While the voice of Jacob resounds in the schools and the academies, the hands of Esau have no power over him."

We have here more than a suggestive interpretation of a Bible text. It is a subtle comment on an historic fact. The school is the most original institution created by post-Biblical Judaism—a magnificent institution, a veritable fortress unshaken by the storms of the ages. To borrow a simile from the Midrash, the school was the heart that kept watch while the other organs slept.

Like the beginning of all genuine life, the beginning of the Jewish school is lost in the mist of ancient days. There can be no doubt, however, that the higher school for adults, the Bet ha-Midrash, or house of study, is of earlier origin than the Bet ha-Sefer, the elementary school. The Bet ha-Midrash was the sphere in which the Soferim, the Scribes, displayed their activity. They were the guardians of literature and culture, who made the Midrash, the interpretation of the Scriptures, their special care and object. For it must be borne in mind that the trend of the times was toward religion. Literary interest was determined by the sacred traditions. By the side of the Soferim were the Hakamim, "the sages," in their Yeshibot, their conventicles. Their knowledge was based on experience and practical observation. It was secular rather than religious. These "sages" soon disappeared. By and by they were merged into the class of the scholars,

the Soferim. That happened when the study of the Torah was enlarged to include every department of human intellectual endeavor. By the second half of the first century of the present era, if not considerably earlier, Hakam, "sage," had become the accepted designation for the scholar.

It was characteristic of the time of the Men of the Great Assembly, another name for the old Soferim, that they urged the duty of "raising up many disciples." Once this idea of higher education had taken root, and the system of higher schools had spread as a network over the whole country, the next step could be taken, the problem of elementary instruction could be considered. A well-authenticated Talmudic tradition has this to say upon the subject: "In the ancient days every father taught his own son. The fatherless boy (and, it should be added, the child of an ignorant father) was given no instruction. Later, schools were erected in Jerusalem. But these were inadequate. The fatherless were still left without teaching. Thereupon schools were opened in the largest town of every district, to which boys of sixteen or seventeen, who could do without the care of their parents, were sent. But it was soon apparent that pedagogic discipline had no effect upon young men who had entered school as adolescents. Then, finally, schools were instituted for children of six or seven."

The large, bold strokes in this outline sketch of the history of Jewish education mark out the progress made during a period of several centuries, roughly speaking, from the time of the Soferim (ab. 400) to the time of the Pharisees (ab. 100). It is a highly significant fact that the man who deserves the title "Father of the Jewish School," was a great leader of the Pharisee party, Rabbi Simon ben Shatah (ab. 70). Of the results achieved by the work inaugurated by Rabbi Simon, we can gain a good idea from Josephus, who proudly points them out to the Greeks one hundred and fifty years later. "Our principal care of all is this," he says, "to educate our children well," . . . "and if anybody do but ask

any one of them (the Jews) about our laws, he will more readily tell them all than he will tell his own name, and this is in consequence of our having learned them immediately, as soon as ever we become sensible of any thing, and of our having them, as it were, engraven on our souls."

It cannot be denied, the relation of reality to rhetoric in Josephus' writings is about the same as in a modern sermon. Yet, after his statements are stripped of exaggerations, there still remains a residuum of facts sufficient to certify to the important place assigned to elementary education in his day. However, we must not fail to take into account that Josephus was conversant chiefly with conditions as they existed among the dwellers in cities. The country folk, constituting perhaps the majority of the Jewish people at that time, were still debarred from the blessings of an education.

The catastrophes that overwhelmed the Jewish nation in the year '70 and in the year 133, reducing flourishing cities and populous villages to ruins, gave a set back to the cause of primary schooling. Accordingly, in the third century of the common era, the leading intellects among the Jews were constrained to devote their attention to the rehabilitation of elementary schools and teaching. Political and economical conditions went on growing worse for the Jews in Palestine. In spite of all efforts put forth to promote and develop educational work, the Holy Land ceased to be the spiritual centre of Judaism. It was replaced by Babylonia. There the work had to be started anew, for the Jews of the Persian realm occupied a very low intellectual plane, and generations passed by until the Palestinian spirit was coaxed to take root and flourish on the banks of the Euphrates. And yet, comparatively speaking, it cannot be said that a long time elapsed before a Jewish culture had established itself in Babylonia. The political and economical conditions of the Jews living there in the third century were the favoring circumstances. Under the Sassanids they formed an all but autonomous body. Influenced by great intellectual

leaders, the exilarchs and the communal authorities fairly vied with each other in fostering and promoting Jewish studies and culture. Scholars were exempt from the poll tax, from communal tributes, and similar imposts. They were permitted to settle wheresoever they would, a great advantage to them if they engaged in business or trades, which as a rule were subjected to restrictions protecting natives against a much-feared competition. Education and knowledge in the course of time became actual, marketable possessions, instead of being, as at first, ideal acquisitions—the best standard by which to measure the degree of idealism prevailing in a nation at large. Where education and intellectual attainments are considered a material asset, idealism must be the attribute of large classes of the people. The natural features of the Babylonian country were another propitious factor. The earth there yielded its products without demanding more than a minimum of human labor. The poorest were in a position to devote several hours of daily leisure to study, and without a great sacrifice they could forego the assistance of their minor children, who thus were permitted to enjoy a schooling of many years' duration.

The wide spread of culture among the Babylonian Jews appears strikingly in their definition of the *Am ha-Arez*, the ignoramus. They applied the harsh term to one who, though he had mastered the Bible and the *Mishnah*, had not penetrated more profoundly into Jewish lore. Contrast this with what the Palestinians called an ignoramus, and the vast progress made in two centuries, more or less, will be apparent. To the Palestinian, the man who could not recite the *Shema* was an ignoramus; one who knew the Bible, let alone the *Mishnah*, was a scholar!

In spite of the important place occupied by the school in the intellectual life of Babylonian Jewry, the material dealing with educational work and facilities preserved in the *Talmud* is so sparse that there is little hope of our ever being able to reconstruct the educational edifice of

the time with any degree of completeness. But there is more than enough to warrant the general impression that the school went on increasing in influence under the Babylonian Jews, and the later development of the Jewish educational system in all the lands of the Dispersion is directly traceable to these vigorous Babylonian beginnings.

Unfortunately, the Talmudic time is not the only period in Jewish educational history of which we are ignorant. We are equally little in a position to attempt a presentation of pedagogic conditions among the Jews in a time much nearer our own, in the Middle Ages. At most we might venture to deal with the higher institutions of learning. For the primary schools our information is too meagre by far. Our reports become full and detailed enough to justify an attempt at description only when we reach the elementary school of the so-called Polish Jews, which is an accurate designation, provided we bear in mind that Polish is here used as a generic term for Eastern Europe so far as Jews are concerned. We must, therefore, limit ourselves to glimpses of the intellectual and spiritual life nursed and developed in the elementary schools of the Polish Jews.

Jews had been living in Poland for centuries before anything was heard of them, certainly nothing was heard about their intellectual life. The persecutions that extended in unbroken sequence from the First Crusade to the Age of the Reformation cast large numbers of German Jews into Poland, whither they carried their Talmudic learning and their German religiousness, for it must not be forgotten that there was a time when the German Jews excelled all others in Jewish exclusiveness and rigorous piety. That was the time in which they had not yet become acquainted with the mission of Israel, of which the essence seems to be that the Jews of one land permit themselves to be done to death in order that their brethren elsewhere may be kept supplied with oratorical munition and clap-trap. Hence the long-enduring march to the East of Europe, especially to Poland, the country

which, according to a well-known Latin saying, is "the heaven of the nobleman, the purgatory of the citizen, the hell of the peasant, and the paradise of the Jew"—such a paradise as the Christian love of those days was likely to concede to him. We may be sure that the narrow-minded town guilds and the fanatical clergy took care not to rob the Jew of his hope for a real Paradise. The economic conditions were far from brilliant even in the sixteenth century, when Polish Jewish prosperity was at its height. In the middle of that century, Rabbi Moses Isserles wrote to a friend in Germany: "Thou hadst been better off in Poland, if only on dry bread, but that at least without anxiety of mind." Rich Jews, like Simon Guenzburg in Germany, for instance, there were none in Poland. But that is not altogether regrettable. The salvation of the Jews was never wrought by the rich among them. What gave Poland its pre-eminence was the circumstance that it offered means of subsistence, however wretched, to the middle class, by permitting the Jews to enter all branches of business, while in the rest of Europe they were confined to petty trading and money-lending.

Such economic conditions sufficed to give an impetus toward a new Jewish culture, and with an external impulse superadded it resulted in an irresistible movement. The outer force that came to aid the inner was the invention of printing, which made knowledge a common possession of the people. The first notable Jewish scholars in Poland of whom we hear, lived and worked at the turn of the fifteenth century. Scarcely a generation after the pioneers, the Jews of Poland had leapt into the forefront of Jewish learning, a sovereign position from which they have not yet been dislodged. The significant fact is that the publication of the first editions of the two Talmudim and of other classical works of Jewish literature fell in the interval that elapsed between the time when Poland had but one scholar of eminence, Rabbi Jacob Pollak, and the time when it produced Rabbi Solomon Loria, the most eminent Talmudist of his day.

Hand in hand with the development of the higher education went the education of the Jewish child, which began at home before he was sent to school, quite in agreement with the principle of the greatest educator of modern times, who holds that education is the concern of the family; from the family it proceeds, and to the family for the most part it returns. Of Jewish pedagogy the characteristic feature was that the three chief ends of education were subserved as a unity at one and the same time. The earliest instruction kept in view at once the intellectual, the moral, and the religious training of the child. As soon as he was able to speak, he was taught Hebrew words and sentences, bringing into play his memory and his perceptive faculties, and the sentences were always of religious bearing. They were mainly Berakot, blessings, especially those that form part of the morning and evening prayers and of the grace after meals. "Blessed be the All-Merciful, the Lord of bread, who giveth food to all beings," is today, as it was four hundred years ago, the form of grace used by the Jewish children in Poland. The morning devotion consisted of two Biblical verses: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One," and "Moses commanded us the Torah as the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob" (Deut. 33, 4), to which the rhymed couplet was added: "To the Torah I shall ever faithful be, For this may God Almighty grant His help to me." Before bedtime, the verse from Psalm 31 was said: "Into Thine hand I commend my spirit; Thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, Thou God of Truth."

A child of three or four years cannot be expected to understand the import of prayers, even when couched in the vernacular. Religious feeling comes into play much later in life. It was an advantage from this point of view that the prayers were put into Hebrew, a language removed from daily concerns. In this somewhat strange guise they appeal to the intellect of the child as well as to his fancy. The alien garb makes them sink into the child-mind as a concrete, almost tangible entity, a vessel

to be kept hold of until the proper content comes to hand to be poured into it. The language of familiar intercourse is too fluid to fulfill this pedagogic purpose. For the same reason Hebrew was used for the civil speeches of polite society first impressed upon a child. Berukim ha-Yoshebim, "Blessed ye who are present here," was the greeting extended by a child entering a room in which the company was seated at the table, and on leaving he was expected to say, Bireshutekem, "with your permission."

The ceremonials of the Jewish religion early caught the fancy of the impressionable child, and kept him fascinated. Having outgrown his baby clothes, the little fellow was given the "prayer-square," the Arba-Kanfot, as part of his first boy's suit. With two such tangible reminders he was in no danger of forgetting his double dignity as a lord of creation and a son of the chosen people. "Shaking" the Lulab on Sukkot, waving little flags on Simhat Torah, filching the Afikomen from the Seder table, and, last but not least, the consumption of delicate butter cookies on Shabuot—these and many other of the lighter ceremonial acts and customs prepared the child admirably for the more serious instruction in the Heder, which was begun when he was five years old.

The Heder! In the face of the misunderstanding to which friend and foe alike have treated it in modern times, it is difficult to speak calmly of this, the greatest institution of post-Biblical Judaism. Surely a defense is out of place when applied to a system still in use now, though its beginnings lose themselves in the obscurity of the days when Rome was a tiny Italian republic and Athens unknown as an intellectual centre. It is obvious that a creation of the epoch of the Scribes in Palestine could not persist unchanged in Spain in the heyday of Greek-Arabic culture, and to expect the New York of the twentieth century to accept, root and branch, the Lublin Heder of the sixteenth, would be as irrational as to judge the Polish Heder at its best by the form and constitution it has adopted in our day.

Evolution is not the only factor that enters into an estimate of historical development. Degeneration is an equally important aspect, especially with a people like the Jews, whose fortunes have often been forced into unnatural channels by the violent hands of unsympathetic outsiders.

The Heder in Poland at the period in which Jewish culture was at its height was neither a public nor a private school. It was an institution supervised by the communal authorities, but managed in detail by private individuals. The choice of the teacher lay with the parents, and the teacher was at liberty to accept and reject pupils as he saw fit, but the community reserved the right to pass upon the number of pupils, the curriculum, the schedule, and other particulars regarding the plan of instruction. The school regulations in force in the Jewish community of Cracow in 1551, the oldest of their kind known, contain various points of interest. A teacher of elementary pupils was not permitted to have more than forty children in his class, and a teacher of Talmud not more than twenty, and for these numbers each of them was required to employ two assistants.

A generation later, the same community adopted rules fixing the salary of the teachers, because, it is said, "their demands are so exorbitant that many are not able to satisfy them." (To understand this, it must be borne in mind that though the community maintained a free school, the Talmud Torah, parents availed themselves of it only in extreme cases of poverty. "Though you have to secure the means by begging, be sure to provide for the instruction of your sons and daughters in the Torah," is a dying father's admonition to his children in his last will and testament dated 1357. The poorest of the poor sent their children to the free Talmud Torah; the merely poor denied themselves food and raiment, and paid for the schooling of their boys and girls. This explains why communal ordinances as well as decisions by eminent rabbis concern themselves with the times when tuition fees fell due. Rabbi Solomon Loria decides that

half the stipulated remuneration must be paid the teacher in advance, to enable him to maintain his establishment decently. In spite of the authority of Loria, his view does not seem to have prevailed, for the teachers, it appears, were paid at the end of the month. By this arrangement the New Moon Day was a holiday, not only for the pupils, who were not required to return to the Heder for the afternoon session, but also for the teachers, who, in addition to their salaries, would sometimes receive "Rosh Hodesh money," a small free-will offering, from their patrons. To prevent sordid competition among teachers, which might have left some of them without school and pupils at the end of a month, it was strictly prohibited to change teachers during the term, and teachers, on the other hand, were not permitted to go about seeking patronage between terms. Parents were expected to decide upon their future action regarding the placing of their children uninfluenced by those financially interested in their decision.

Hebrew reading was the earliest subject in the Heder course of study. The alphabet was put on large charts, first in the usual order, from Alef to Taw, and again in the reverse order, from Taw to Alef; then with vowels and again without vowels. The charts contained also a few Bible verses. To enliven the drudgery of alphabet learning, the children were taught not merely the names of the letters, but also the meaning of the names, of their form, and their position, a method not unlike that of the modern picture book. This practical way of teaching appealed both to the fancy and the intellect. Alef-Bet—the child was told—means "learn wisdom;" Gimel-Dalet, "be merciful to the poor," etc. Thus the stiff array of letters was changed into the signs of life. Other modern systems are represented, too. "Tell the child," says an author of the sixteenth century, "that the Bet has its mouth open, and the Pe has its mouth closed." The pedagogue thus conveyed to the learner not only the difference in the appearance of these two letters, but also the difference in the position of the lips in pronouncing

them, and to this day the Kamez, the long o, is described in the Heder as the Patah with a beard.

The next step was to the prayer-book, which became the text-book for reading as soon as the boy was able to put letters together into words. As it was a cherished purpose to have the child say the prayers by himself as soon as possible, no attention was paid to their meaning, until he could read them fluently, on the principle that a child was first to be religiously active, and religious thinking would follow as his intelligence developed with years. Moreover, the prayers not being composed in the classical Hebrew, it was thought advisable to defer effective instruction in the Hebrew language until the study of the Bible could be begun. The third Book of Moses was chosen as the first subject of instruction in the Bible—the principle here being, the law of Israel before the history of Israel. After a part of Leviticus had been taken, the instructor devoted himself to teaching as much of each week's Pentateuch portion as the pupil's time and capacity permitted. The disadvantage of this practice was, that the beginner, unable to manage the whole portion, acquired the Pentateuch in fragments. On the other hand, it must be remembered that to teach Hebrew grammar was at this stage as little the intention as to convey the historical content of the Scriptures or their theological interpretation. The aim for the moment was to enable the learner to acquire an extensive Hebrew vocabulary. With only this in view, it was not long before a boy of even average ability could easily be made to go through the week's portion in season.

A clear notion of the methods of Bible instruction in vogue in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may be gained from two works entitled, *Baer* (or *Beer*) *Mosheh*, and *Lekah Tob*, written by a Rabbi Moses Saertels, and printed at Prague in 1604-5. The author himself tells us that it was his purpose to perpetuate in print the traditional translation and explanation of the Bible. This being the case, it does not astonish us to find the regulations of the Jewish community of Cracow making it ob-

ligatory upon teachers to use Rabbi Moses Saertels' books. From a comparison with the Bible Commentary by Rashi it appears that they depend upon it throughout. Virtually they are an introduction to Rashi, whose Commentary was the text-book given to the pupil after he had mastered a part of the Bible.

Another subject in the primary classes of the Heder was writing, both the square characters and the script, the latter, the so-called Juedisch-Deutsch, used in correspondence. If we mention, besides, arithmetic from addition to division, and the outlines of Hebrew etymology, we have exhausted the curriculum of the primary Heder, or, as the Jewish expression goes, the work of the Melamed Dardake, the primary teacher.

At the age of about ten the boy passed from the primary Heder to its higher division, the Talmud Heder, in which all subjects of study gave way to the Talmud, and henceforth he devoted himself to it exclusively. The Melamed Dardake surrendered him to the Talmud teacher, and in his charge he remained until he was able to enter the Yeshibah, the Talmudic high school.

A latter-day description of Talmudical studies in a Polish Heder is not unlike the sensations a hungry man experiences while reading the menu of a French chef. Of what avail the fine names without the substantial products of his art? Shibboleths like Pilpul, dialectics, sophistry, beg the question. They are weak characterizations of an intellectual tendency that moulded the greatest Talmudists of the last four hundred years. Modern historians are lavish of praise for the well-ordered studies of the Sefardim, and equally lavish of censure for the topsy-turvy methods of the Polish Heder, which embarked a ten-year-old lad on the "sea of the Talmud." In view of this attitude, is it not rather startling to find that since the time of Rabbi Joseph Caro (d. 1575) the Sefardim cannot show a single name in the realm of the Talmud comparable with the distinguished scholars of Poland? Would it not seem that after all there must have been

method in the methodlessness of the Polish Jew? The principle underlying the study of the Talmud in Poland was "*non multa sed multum*," not number, but quality. Whatever was studied, was searched out in every detail, while with the Sefardim the thing that signified was the extent of the field covered. For the Sefardim learning was a matter of sentiment, for the Polish Jew it was an intellectual occupation. The former studied in order to know how the law would have them act in given practical cases; the latter in order to analyze the theory on which the practice was based. The Sefardic student aimed to become a Rabbi who would have to decide questions of law and custom; the Ashkenazic student, to become a Lamdan able to control the decisions of his rabbi and, in case of necessity, show up their falsity. The protest made by a number of prominent Polish scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, against the dominant practice in the study of the Talmud, was justified from the point of view of sentiment. The dialectic method gradually secularized Jewish religious knowledge. But it must be borne in mind, the Lamdan educated in the Heder does not represent the class of the pious; he is the type of the educated Jew, and the decried method was the only one calculated to produce this type. It is unfair to think of the Heder as a religious school, as it is generally assumed to be. It was more, it was the institution for general Jewish education.

Errors are transmitted like diseases. The inaccurate rendering of the Hebrew word "Torah" by "law," for which we are indebted to our Greek-speaking writers, has all along been a barrier in the way of the Christian theologian. It has prevented him effectually from understanding the system of rabbinism as a whole, but especially from understanding the specific ideal of rabbinism which is summed up in the term Talmud Torah, the study of the Torah. The most deplorable aspect of this lack of comprehension is that it has not remained without effect upon the Jews themselves, at least so far as the development of post-Talmudic Judaism is concerned.

Torah is not law. It is an expression for the aggregate of Jewish teachings. It comprises every field and mark of culture—morality, justice, society, education, etc. The term aims to gather them all up as a unit, because the Jewish view is that all the nobler manifestations of human conduct must be connected with religion. The education of the Jewish child, beginning with the Soferim down to our own day, has been exclusively Jewish, though not exclusively religious, certainly not exclusively legalistic. Paradoxical as it may sound, the education of the Ashkenazic child was more secular than the education of the Sefardic child. The Jewish school of the Sefardim had a more strongly religious character than that of the Ashkenazim, in spite of the fact that the Sefardic child was taught non-Jewish branches of knowledge. Externalists do not count. Nine hundred years ago, non-Jewish children sat on the same benches with Jewish children in a synagogue used for school purposes. That was among Sefardim. Nothing like it is thinkable among the Ashkenazim, because their educational system was laid out on Jewish lines entirely. Non-Jewish knowledge was rarely cultivated by them. The very fact that the Sefardim were often adepts in philosophy and the natural sciences, produced the result that Jewish studies among them gradually stiffened into a religious exercise. They cultivated them to satisfy their heart cravings. For the Sefardic intellect there were other than Jewish sources of gratification. With the Ashkenazim, Jewish studies offered the sole and only field for the manifestation of their mental activity. As a consequence, even their religious literature was cultivated for educational and intellectual purposes. At the end of about five centuries of parallel development, the two tendencies culminated in the sixteenth century, the one in the Kabbalah of the Orientals, the other in the Pilpul of the Jews of Poland. The process that took place was this: When the Sefardim were expelled from Spain and came to countries in which culture and science were at a low ebb, their intellect had no support; they had to fall

back upon their Jewish feeling, and so they lost themselves in mysticism. In Poland, again, where the Jews likewise came in contact with a low stage of cultural development, that intellectual attitude asserted itself in them which in the twelfth century had brought forth the school of the Tossafists in France. Critics like Rabbi Solomon Loria and Rabbi Joel Sirkes in Poland may fitly be mentioned in the same breath with Rabbi Jacob Tam and Rabbi Isaac ben Samuel in France. The *Pilpul*, so far from being the result of a process of deterioration, is in reality nothing but the inevitable issue from the intellectual movement inaugurated by the *Soferim*. From the first the school was raised on a national basis, the only firm foundation for the education of the young, and as religion occupies the most prominent place in the national life of the Jews, the Jewish school was a religious institution as well. So long as the Jews lived in their own land, and could develop their national life without let or hindrance, there was no objection to introducing elements of alien origin into the school. It had no difficulty in transforming them Jewishly and assimilating them.

But when a national life was precluded, the Jewish school perforce had to narrow its compass. This was the only escape from the dangers of absorption by the surrounding cultures which menaced Jewish intellectual life. But even after its aims suffered such contraction, the Jewish school did not fail to reveal the intellectual impulse as the mainspring of the education it afforded. In spite of its one-sidedness in excluding everything non-Jewish, therefore, the *Heder* did not cease to be the great national institution for the development of the Jewish intellect.

To return to the *Heder* itself, different as the course of studies and the method of teaching are in the *Heder* from those in the modern school, the two institutions depart still further from each other in the life their respective pupils led and still lead. Life in the *Heder* was arranged with more than due regard for individuality. Not

only was the Heder, as we have seen, a private institution in which the parents were given the opportunity of choosing the teacher with a view to their children's needs and gifts, but also the teaching was personal in character. Restricted as the number of pupils was, they were still divided into Kitot, sections. The teacher usually occupied himself with no more than four children at a time. In this way a close personal relation could grow up between master and pupil. It was practically impossible to deceive a teacher by palming off work on him done by others at home. Instruction, especially in the Talmud, was discursive, and the cadence, or, better, the sing-song, of a Talmudic sentence sufficed to indicate whether or not the little Talmudist understood it. The result was that in many cases the teacher came to take a vital personal interest in the pupils. With pleasure and pride he would observe the progress of his boys, and no greater joy could come to him than to be caught napping by one of them who urged a difficult objection to some Talmudic statement, which the teacher was not prepared to refute on the spot. As the whole system purposed the training of the intellect, a "good scholar" in the Heder meant only a mentally well-endowed pupil. Qualities other than intellectual did not count. "A mischievous boy has a good head" is the Jewish way of saying that a bright boy is privileged to indulge in pranks in the Heder.

As a rule the teachers were mild enough in meting out punishment. Some of their gentleness may perhaps be set to the account of self-interest. They may have feared to lose paying pupils through overgreat severity. One of the teachers describes the dilemma in which he and his confreres were often placed, in the following graphic words: "When a teacher flogs one of his pupils, he bursts into tears, goes home to his father, and complains tearfully. The father gets angry, and the boy is encouraged to complain to his mother, too. She, in her affection for her son, incites the father against the teacher, who, she says, has come within an ace of killing the boy,

and she calls him a fool. Naturally, the father is wrought up against the teacher, and seeks to engage him in a quarrel, etc., etc."

We may be quite sure that the Melamed was not the brute pictured by the morbid imagination of certain Mas-kilim, whose animus against the Heder is probably to be sought in a hatred of the deeply Jewish atmosphere that prevailed there, and prevailed in spite of the lack of explicit religious instruction in the modern sense. The Heder would have refused to tolerate long-winded definitions of the being and existence of God, and the little Talmud pupil would not have suppressed his whence and his what, his *Mino hane Mille* and his *Mai ko mash-ma lan*. The Jewish martyrs and saints were not raised in the hot-house atmosphere of religion spread by the catechism, and it is hardly an accident that the desire for religious text-books did not manifest itself until Judaism was being forced into the four walls of the synagogue. Previous to that time Jewish literature, rich as it was, had no such book to show, except a single one, the author of which became a convert to Christianity after writing it. The Jewish religion is not a religious arithmetic. It does not permit the idea to usurp the place of the spirit. From the first, the Jew has felt that reality is not abstract, but individual. Religion to be a vital influence must be lived, not taught, and this condition was fulfilled in the Heder. The whole life there was religiously Jewish, for though the Jewish school aimed first and foremost to cultivate the mind, the other point of view was never lost sight of, that "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov., 1, 7). The teachings of the Prophets and the lives of the sages were not abstractions to the Heder boys, but flesh and bone realities. Rabbi Akiba's persistence, through which the water carrier became the most celebrated scholar of his day, his devotion to his wife Rachel, and his martyr death, were not incidents in the biography of a hero dead fifteen hundred years. They formed the history of an old and tried friend whose acts and opinions left an in-

delible impression upon the child's mind. The Melamed, on the other hand, was not a critical historian. He did not differentiate history from fable. The gnat that was said to have gnawed the brain of Titus was as historical to him as the destruction of the Temple by the same Titus. And yet he did more for the preservation of Jewish nationalism than all the well-turned phrases of the tribe of modern orators, when on the day preceding Tishah be-Ab, in a voice choked with tears, he read the Hurban to his pupils, the Talmudic narrative recounting the details of the catastrophe that overtook Israel in the year '70, and again in 133. It was reserved for a system of education planned on scientific, historical lines to produce Jews who believe, or desire others to believe, that the day commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem ought to be celebrated as a feast day, for the alleged reason that it was the event enabling the Jew to go forth and proclaim his mission throughout the whole extent of the world. Many a graduate of the Heder has become an apostate, but never has it been guilty of producing hybrid Jews who feign a desire to Judaize the world while they are in reality de-Judaizing the Jews.

As history was disregarded in the Heder, so ethics as such did not appear in the curriculum. There was no need to give moral instruction directly. The study of the Talmud and of rabbinical literature took the place of the best conceivable manual of ethics. It compelled the student to think profoundly and assimilate actively what suited the needs of his nature in the ample wealth of moral teachings scattered throughout this literature. The pupil was not called upon to compose his face solemnly while moral exhortations were poured down upon his devoted head. In the regular course of studies prescribed, the Talmud offered him ethical observations of fundamental importance, while ostensibly propounding an intricate judicial question which requires fine dialectical reasoning. The transition from the legal element to the ethical is almost imperceptible; sometimes the interrelation between them is so close that the dividing line

cannot be discerned. Accordingly, the intellectual interest of the student was not interrupted. "Let thy yea be yea, and thy nay, nay," for instance, is the last link in a long chain of complicated discussions on the legal character of a deposit, and the conclusion meant nothing to the student who had not followed the devious reasoning understandingly and constructively.

Nor was the imagination of the child left to starve. How could it, with the numberless stories the Talmud contains about the life and deeds of the great in Israel! Take, for example, the very sentence just quoted: "Let thy yea be yea, and thy nay, nay." As an illustration of it, we are told concerning Rabbi Safra that he was negotiating a sale. The would-be purchaser happened to approach Rabbi Safra and speak to him about the transaction at the very moment when the rabbi was engaged in reciting the Shema. Not noticing that the rabbi was praying, he made him an offer. Rabbi Safra naturally would not interrupt his prayer. With a gesture he tried to convey to the purchaser that he did not wish to be disturbed. Misunderstanding the import of the gesture, he offered a higher price. At the end of his devotions Rabbi Safra accepted the first price. He would not profit by the other's mistake, for he had silently given his assent to the lower sum.

Again, could there be a more impressive way of teaching children the Jewish view of the treatment of animals than through the suffering of the Patriarch Rabbi Judah, the compiler of the Mishnah? A calf, the Talmud tells us, about to be led to the shambles took refuge with Rabbi Judah, and hid his head in his mantle, entreating help. "Go," said Rabbi Judah, "for this thou wast created." Thereupon it was said in heaven: "Because he showed no mercy, no mercy shall be shown to him," and suffering was decreed for him. One day his maid-servant wanted to pluck out a nest of young weasels which she found in his house, and cast them out to perish. "Leave them in peace," said Rabbi Judah, "it is said of God, 'His tender mercies are over all His

works' (Ps., 145, 9)." Then it was said in heaven: "Because he showed mercy, mercy shall be shown to him," and his pain ceased forthwith. To develop the feeling for which Jewish tenderness more than fifteen hundred years ago coined the significant expression, *Za'ar Ba'ale Hayyim*, this naive story was more effective than the empty babblings of hysterical women on our duty to the brute creation. The Heder boy, whose sole aim was to search out and know the teachings of the ancients, derived his ideals from those whose lives interested him in the measure in which he entered into their ideals.

The Heder life must not be thought of as a life of serious tasks only. The boys had more opportunity to play tricks there than in a modern school. Games and youthful merriment were quite compatible with the big Talmud folios. The Heder decidedly had its gay side. On the whole, its life may be said to have been less rule-bound than life in a modern school. To begin with, the chief spur to study was the expectation of reward rather than the fear of punishment. Following in the footsteps of old Jewish authorities of high standing, a popular book of the beginning of the seventeenth century has this to say of the bringing up of children: "One should always teach a child in pleasant ways. First give him fruit, or sugar, or honey cake, and later small coins. Then he should be promised clothes as a present, always making the reward agree with his intelligence and his years. Then tell him, if he will study diligently, he may expect a large dowry when he marries; and later he should be told, that if he will study diligently, he will be ordained and will officiate as a rabbi. He must be urged on until the boy himself realizes that he must study because it is the will of God." The directions to teachers are of similar tenor, and it was the general habit of teachers to attract the children by kindness. To this very day it is the custom, as it was hundreds of years ago, for the teacher to throw sweets or a few pennies on the alphabet chart when the child has his first lesson at school, saying at the same

time: "This an angel has thrown down for you, because you are so good." In some congregations the teachers used to prepare a treat for the children on Hamishah Asar be-Shebat, and on Lag ba-Omer, when, besides, no school sessions were held.

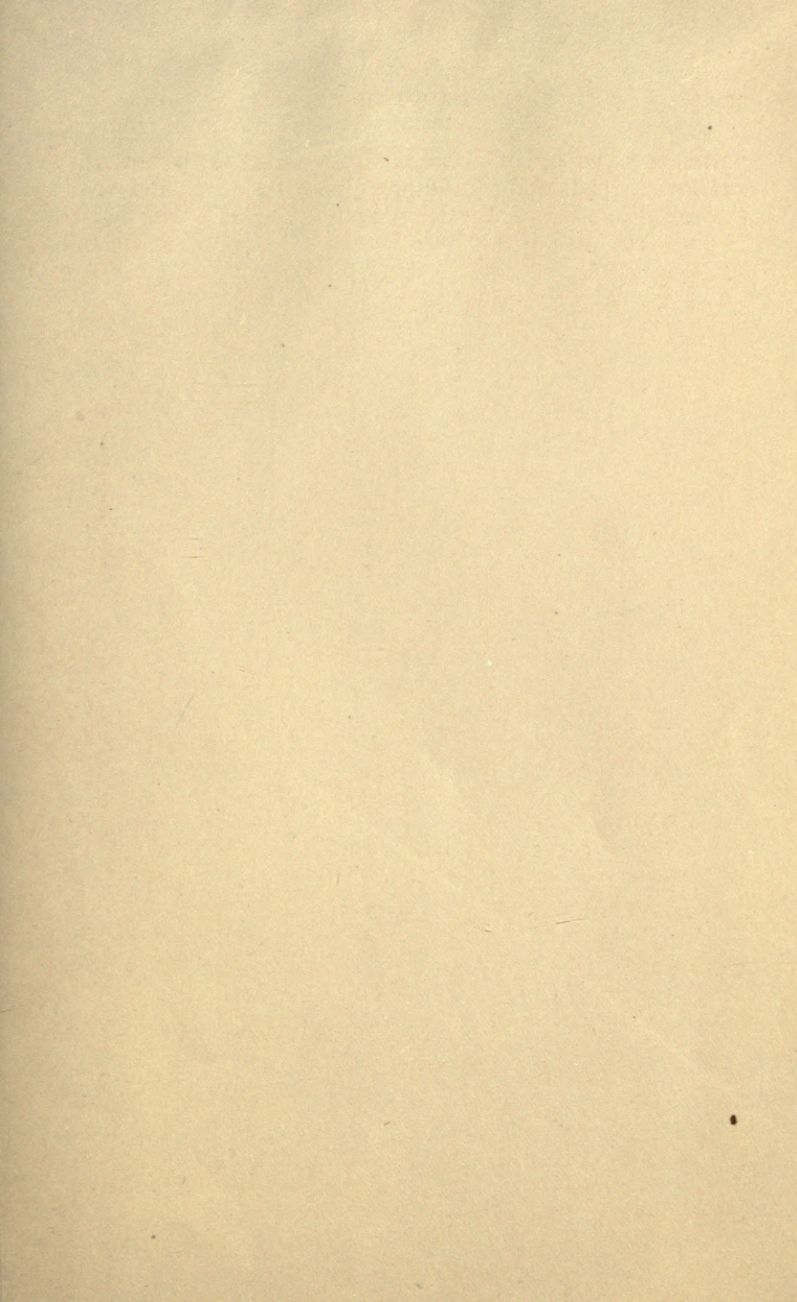
The teacher had neither time nor disposition to play games with the children. His place was taken by his assistant, the "Behelfer," who called for the children at their homes and took them back after school hours, and one of whose duties it was to provide for the entertainment and recreation of his charges. The Behelfer was the one who carved the wooden swords for Tishah be-Ab, and manufactured the flags for Simhat Torah. If the boys were well-behaved, he allowed them to be present while he made his preparations for the Purim play, in which he took the part of Mordecai or Haman, or, at a pinch, of Esther even. The big boys, who presumably had outgrown the services of the Behelfer, did not scorn to buy his good-will, sometimes with hard cash. In the first place, it was important to be in his good graces, else he might betray their pranks to the teacher. Besides, his active help could not always be dispensed with. In summer he was the swimming master, and in winter he taught the boys how to skate, the two most delightful forms of amusement known to Heder boys. But even such neutral and secular interests lying at the periphery of Heder life did not escape its genuinely Jewish atmosphere. The boys did not hesitate to call a certain fancy figure on the ice the "Wa-Yomer David run," because it was executed in the same position as the prayer beginning with these words was said, with the head resting on the arm. In addition to all these accomplishments, the Behelfer was an adept in making the Dreher, and this game, known to the Greeks, Romans and Germans, was also given a Jewish aspect. It was played only on Hanukah, but then most vigorously. The "Kitot," the sections, of the class not actively engaged with the teacher, played it in the intervals between lessons during the Hanukah days, behind the teacher's back, of course. Its

connection with Hanukah was established by interpreting the letters on its four sides as the initial letters of the sentence, *Nes gadol hayah sham*, "A great miracle was done there."

And, in fact, a great miracle ~~was~~ done there! The wonderful salvation of Israel was wrought *there*, in the Heder! Goethe advises us "always to oppose the great masses produced by the historical process of the ages, to the perversities of the fleeting hour as they arise." According to this, the perversities that result when individual observations are over-emphasized and ephemeral fashions are followed, ought to be opposed by the Jewish school as it was developed in the course of twenty centuries and more. An important and profound lesson will be derived, which the Talmud expresses in the words: "He who says, nothing exists for me but the Jewish religion, not even the Jewish religion exists for him." Although the Jewish school was the nursery of all the manifold aspects of the Jewish spirit, yet it brought forth not only heroes of the intellect, but religious geniuses as well. If hitherto the Jews have put no pictures of saints in their synagogues, it has not been for lack of saints, else they might long ago have resorted to the device of borrowing them from the other nations. It was because the Jews met their ideal saint outside of the synagogue as well as inside. He was a thinking and an acting saint, no less than a praying saint.

The most significant truth to be learned from the long history of Jewish education remains to be mentioned. All true culture issues from a unified *Weltanschauung*, from a decided view of life and men and the world, and in the last resort the value of culture depends upon the help it gives us in acquiring and formulating such a *Weltanschauung*. But we must not expect to find it at religious tea parties, at which weak tea is served with still weaker religion. When it became the fad of the lady of leisure, the doom of the Jewish school was pronounced, and if it is to resume its old place and significance in Jewish life, it must cease to be the supernumerary ad-

junct of a person or a cause.' It must again be an independent institution, fulfilling its task autonomously. It must be, as it was, the focus of Jewish life, of the Jewish intellect, and of the Jewish religion.



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